

FDI Feature Interview

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Chris Ferreira – The Battle with Fire: Meeting Fire Authorities Halfway

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Key Points

- Recent catastrophic bushfire events, while not unprecedented, have forced many Australians to question the sustainability of a lifestyle that has been, until now, largely taken for granted.
- In some areas, less than eight per cent of homeowners in high fire risk areas have a detailed fire plan.
- As a society we need to have the same mindset about building and living in high fire risk areas, as we have about letting people drive a car on our roads.
- Many rural and peri-urban subdivisions have not been designed with fire safety in mind. Scattered homes perched on ridgelines, linked by a single narrow road through deep tall forest, do not promote an effective fire response.
- There are many effective design, education and management programmes available, which could help guide us to better bushfire management.

Introduction

The recent catastrophic bushfire events experienced on the east coast of Australia, while not unprecedented, have forced many Australians to question the sustainability of a lifestyle that has been both cherished and taken for granted. International reporting of the crisis was uncharacteristically detailed and pessimistic. Gideon Rachman, of the Financial Times, reported that '[Australia is no longer the lucky country](#)' and Damien Cave, Chief of the New York Times Sydney Bureau, [envisaged Australians being forced to](#) '...imagine an entirely new way of life. When summer is feared. When air filters hum in homes that are bunkers, with kids kept indoors. When birdsong and the rustle of marsupials in the bush give way to an eerie, smoky silence.'

It is widely acknowledged that fundamental changes need to be made, if Australians are to continue to enjoy a lifestyle lived near or within the natural environment. The prospects, however, may not be as bleak as some sources predict. Even in the context of climate change, where these events may become more frequent and occur with greater intensity, there are still steps that can be taken to prevent, or at least mitigate, the risks. Chris Ferreira of the **Forever Project**, an organisation dedicated to protecting our environment for a

sustainable, happy and prosperous future, maintains that a key consideration for dealing with future bushfires, is to inspire and empower members of fire-affected communities to be better prepared.

FDI has taken the opportunity to interview Chris about his belief that a vital outcome of this concept is to have these communities “meet fire authorities halfway in the battle with fire”.



Figure 1. A homeowner inspects the damage done to his property by one of this season’s many bushfires. Source: www.science.org.

Interview

FDI – What do you mean by this concept of meeting authorities halfway in the battle with fire?

Firefighting authorities will tell you, with discernible horror, how poorly prepared most homeowners are for catastrophic fire events. We know that in Western Australia alone, less than eight per cent of homeowners in high fire risk areas have anything close to a detailed fire plan. This means that the overwhelming majority have a potentially devastating mix of a poorly designed and managed property and an unhealthy complacency about their role in being ‘fire safe’. These problems are coupled with a totally unrealistic belief that ‘the cavalry’ (i.e. firefighting crews) will always warn them and /or come to their rescue.

Meeting the fire authorities halfway means embracing three rather inconvenient and uncomfortable truths:

- accept that if you are outside the city confines, then there is a good chance that you live in some of the most dangerous, fire-prone, areas on the planet;
- as much as possible, you should take responsibility for your own fire safety; and
- you need to assume (and this is the tough one) that you are on your own when it comes to managing the impacts of fire. Images of water bombers, tankers and even marching reservists, while reassuring, tend to set up the false belief that help is always going to be there.

The simple truth is, that the best we can muster in people, assets and expertise is simply no match for the sheer size and might of a catastrophic fire.

The good news is, that if you can swallow and digest these three inconvenient and uncomfortable truths, then if the worst happens and fire threatens, you are statistically more likely to have: a workable exit strategy; a place that can be defended; and if you are lucky enough to have 'the cavalry', that they will make the decision that your property is safe enough to risk their lives to defend.

FDI – Do individuals and communities need to better design and manage their properties?

Absolutely!

As a society we need to have the same mindset about building and living in high fire risk areas, as we have about letting people drive a car on our roads! We know through the bloody chapters of our transport history, that the risks of unregulated car usage are just too high. Consequently, we demand that an aspiring driver must earn and maintain a licence. They must pass a rigorous testing process to prove that they have the skills and commitment to drive in what can be a very dangerous space. Those skills must then be maintained by adherence to a strict set of road rules. The same strict standards should be required of people living in high fire risk regions of Australia. In this case proving, through a planning, design and management process, that they are doing all they can to create a FireWise space to live in. But, just as with the fabled car licence, it doesn't guarantee your safety; but it will certainly, and significantly, increase the odds in your favour.

FDI – If they do need better design and management, what are the present shortfalls?

Pretty much everything! Like most areas of society, where adaptation is needed, and needed fast, we are dealing with the thorny combination of pre-existing, as well as proposed, design, development and management needs in high fire risk areas.

Retrospectively, many rural and peri-urban subdivisions have clearly not been designed with fire safety in mind. Scattered homes perched on ridgelines, linked by a single narrow road threading its way through deep tall forest, is hardly a recipe for a calm and effective fire response. Similarly, we are drowning in a sea of opinion, hysteria and extremism, making it hard to rally everyone behind clear and coherent strategies and design standards. Until we have national standards across all of those spheres of influence: in the way we design and develop communities, right through to the way we build and manage the homes, gardens and the broader property landscape, we will continue to lose lives, infrastructure, livestock and wildlife at catastrophic levels.

FDI – What do they need to do to overcome these shortfalls?

The good news is that there are many effective design, education and management programmes available to help guide us. The Forever Project, over the last 6 years, has developed the [Fire: Resilience and Recovery](#) programme (see attached link), which has been designed to inspire and empower developers, community leaders, fire agencies and, of course, rural residents, to create safer landscapes.

Our key theme is to use a suite of different approaches to effectively engage a disparate community, which is burdened with a heady mix of misinformation and action paralysis in what is a highly charged, but poorly informed, space. Using the *Fire: Resilience and Recovery* programme as a template for the future, we can rollout a schedule of ongoing events, to set standards for the key areas of settlement development and living in high fire risk regions of Australia.

Critically, we can start with broader community settlement design, ensuring that future settlement location, connection and design is viewed and developed through the prism of fire safety. That means we will assess landscapes, apportion them a fire danger rating and ensure that all development decisions will be guided by this. We will probably see a greater emphasis on cluster rural development, locating habitation in the safer, more accessible, areas and encircling them with appropriate road networks for access and safety.

Through the [Fire: Resilience and Recovery](#) programme, we can roll out planning and design programmes to empower landholders in these regions. Retrospectively, landholders can be encouraged, or mandated, to attend such courses, where they will learn the principles of sustainable property design. Based on the principles of land care and Whole Farm Planning, this gives us the best set of tools to help landholders create safer, more sustainable, productive and beautiful landscapes. This proven planning methodology (used across Australia since the mid-1980s, to help thousands of farmers better manage millions of hectares of landscape), gives us the greatest chance of not only helping people create appropriate FireWise design, but providing a clear process for implementation, which, of course, can then be assessed by fire management officers. Clever FireWise design and management can lead to tangible improvements in landscape and community resilience, as well as discernible improvements in land holders' acceptance of their role in creating the safest rural properties.

The Fire: Resilience and Recovery programme includes a suite of novel approaches, to engage with what is a notoriously difficult audience base. This includes:

- FireWise Property Planning workshops – we highlight, showcase and help design the four main areas where FireWise improvements can be made:
 - The home - to reduce the impact of ember attack, flame impact and radiant heat;
 - The asset protection/firesafe zone surrounding the home – to develop a FireWise garden and landscape;
 - Bushland management – to balance the need for fuel load management and biodiversity; and
 - Broader farmscape management – focusing on strategies to create perennial pastures, shelterbelts, fuel load and weed burden management, water and drought proofing design principles.
- Hope in the Hills bus tours, to showcase ordinary landholders and land managers doing progressive work and development in the FireWise space
- Establishment of educational FireWise demonstration landscapes. We have set these up in high profile spaces in rural settlements, to provide rural residents with permanent examples that they can use and reference, to help them create their own FireWise landscapes
- Fire resilience and recovery Expos – these are designed to be held at gathering spaces and places like community halls or Bunnings stores, where the maximum number of people can drop in and get valuable information.

FDI – What impact will this approach have on protecting soil health and productivity?

Following on from the last point, the concept of adapting land care and Whole Farm Planning to create FireWise landscapes, is a powerful opportunity to create an Australian rural landscape designed to collect,

harvest and utilise water. This will not only help with soil moisture retention and drought proofing, but enhancing water infiltration into the soil will increase water availability and subsequent uptake by vegetation. This, in turn, will keep fuel loads better 'hydrated' and thus less susceptible to burning.

Enhancing soil moisture retention and infiltration will also drive soil productivity, which will enhance carbon capture and soil microbial activity. An emphasis on strategic planting and the retention of perennial systems on the farm scapes (be that trees, shrubs or perennial pastures) will help build soil carbon, soil productivity and, of course, increase moisture banks in the soil. That effect will increase the amount of moisture available to plants, thus buffering (at least to some degree) against excessive drying out of the organic material, which will enhance its defence against flammability in fire risk conditions.

[Download a copy of The Forever Project publication Fire: Resilience & Recovery.](#)

About the Interviewee:

Chris Ferreira has been a leading, high profile, exponent of sustainable land management in WA for over 25 years.

He specialises in innovative education programmes that inspire and empower people from all walks of life to lead more fulfilling and sustainable lives. The programmes provide expertise in: sustainable landscaping; urban forestry; land care; sustainable small farm management; water, nutrient and energy efficient building; revegetation; and sustainable urban design.

Chris is the Founder and Managing Director of the award-winning company, The Forever Project (incorporating Landcare Solutions), specialising in environmental design, management, community engagement education and media.

Both directly and through his programs, Chris has taught over 130,000 people, with his inspiring and empowering talks on all aspects of sustainable living in WA. He has emerged as a leading authority on sustainable living in WA.

In addition, Chris is also a Director on a range of high profile and award-winning projects, including:

- Great Gardens - Australia's largest free community education scheme, reaching more than 100,000 people across WA through hundreds of workshops since 2003.
- Heavenly Hectares - providing workshops for rural communities on sustainable land management since 1993, reaching over 14,000 hobby farmers and inspiring the book "A Place in the Country".
- The Hamilton Home Sustainable Home - an innovative sustainable home and garden project setup by Chris and his partner in May 2011, where they designed and retrofitted a 1950's cottage into a model sustainable home. Since its completion, it has operated in partnership with Open Gardens Australia, ABC local radio and the National Sustainable House day. Over 8,000 people have toured the home. In 2018, he launched his first book 'A Place in the Country' that

focuses on how the next generation of landholders can buck the trend and create beautiful, productive and sustainable farm scapes.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual interviewee, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International. The views of the interviewee are his personal view as author of the book and are not of his current and past employers.

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